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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 34th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. KRENKEL (Austria)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 96: REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES, QUESTIONS RELATING TO REFUGEES, RETURNEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS AND HUMANITARIAN QUESTIONS (A/47/91-S/23585, A/47/131, A/47/178, A/47/280, A/47/296, A/47/351-S/24357, A/47/365, A/47/391, A/47/420-S/24519, A/47/455-S/24571 and A/47/638-S/24772)

(a) REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES (A/47/12 and Add.1)

(b) QUESTIONS RELATING TO REFUGEES, RETURNEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS (A/47/364 and 529 and Corr.1)

(c) HUMANITARIAN QUESTIONS (A/47/352, 420, 455 and 540)

1. Mrs. OGATA (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) introducing the item, said that the two main functions of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were to provide international protection to refugees and seek durable solutions to their problems. International protection could be provided only through and in cooperation with Governments. The Office must be fully recognized as acting on behalf of the international community and representing non-political, humanitarian concerns.

2. The past year had been a turbulent one. Three million refugees had been forced into exile, while a million and a half had returned home. World wide, the number of refugees had continued to increase inexorably, reaching no fewer than 18 million. As the lead agency in the former Yugoslavia, UNHCR had been striving to provide humanitarian assistance to some 3 million refugees and displaced persons. It had also been grappling with new and massive flows of refugees. In Kenya, their number exceeded 420,000 mainly from the disaster in Somalia and, to a lesser extent, Ethiopia. The number of refugees from Mozambique had increased further, reaching 1.5 million amid the worst African drought in recent memory. UNHCR had also been confronted with the arrival of a quarter of a million refugees fleeing from Myanmar into poverty-stricken Bangladesh.

3. Simultaneously, the Office was faced with the demands of massive repatriation movements to Afghanistan, Cambodia, Iraq, Ethiopia, Angola and South Africa. Never had the experience of UNHCR in providing protection and assistance to refugees and returnees been so intensely relevant and so extensively tested. Unprecedented demands on the Office had been matched by unprecedented financial support. She noted with appreciation that, during the year, more than $900 million had been received from Governments in response to total needs exceeding $1 billion for the first time in history.

(Mrs. Ogata)

4. The scale and complexity of the humanitarian crisis confronting the world reflected the current uncertainty and instability. Resurgent nationalism, coupled with the serious economic and social consequences of the collapse of the old world order, had led to a proliferation of conflicts. The Office faced a number of fundamental challenges that went to the very heart of its mandate. Given its experience, demonstrated capacity to innovate and the indispensable support of Governments, UNHCR would continue to adapt to new challenges while preserving the established principles of international protection. In the radically changed international environment, new opportunities and imperatives had emerged, not only for responding to refugee situations, but also for preventing and resolving them in the countries from which the refugees came. The past 12 months had tested the Office's three-pronged strategy, consisting in prevention, preparedness and solutions.

5. Preventive action must tackle the root causes of refugee flows, which were inextricably linked to political conflicts and violations of human rights. Consequently, the Office had sought to enhance its cooperation with the human rights machinery of the United Nations and other relevant organizations. With the cooperation of the Governments concerned, UNHCR had greatly stepped up preventive activities in Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

6. Prevention, however, also meant direct engagement in situations of acute crisis or open conflict. The Office had extended protection and assistance to internally displaced persons and other victims of conflict in an effort to limit the impetus to flight. In the former Yugoslavia, for instance, the Office's presence in the middle of a conflict aimed at uprooting people had confronted UNHCR with a real dilemma. It was unclear to what extent the Office could persuade people to remain where they were in order to prevent displacement and "ethnic cleansing" without exposing them to danger. Even in such conditions of extreme risk, however, international presence made a difference. Prevention was hands-on action, dependent on direct presence and linked to emergency response and the search for solutions.

7. Preventive activities could help to contain human catastrophe by creating the time and space for the political process to take place. Prevention, however, must also be seen in the broader context of questions to be dealt with by the United Nations system, such as dealing with massive violations of human rights or striking the right balance so that sanctions served as a political tool, but did not become a lethal weapon against the weak.

8. with regard to preparedness, she had sought over the past year, to strengthen further the capacity of UNHCR to respond to emergencies by setting up five emergency teams, increasing training and arranging for stockpiles of relief goods and rapid deployment of staff. At the same time, once an emergency phase was completed and refugees were reintegrated into their communities, the Office should rapidly transfer its activities to other appropriate organizations. After a little more than a year in northern Iraq,

(Mrs. Ogata)

during which UNHCR had assisted some 1.7 million refugees and displaced persons, the Office had withdrawn from the area and redeployed its staff of some 180 persons to other emergency areas. Thus, UNHCR must have the capacity both to respond effectively and to withdraw rapidly, and should not provide regular, ongoing programmes.

9. As for finding solutions - the third aspect of the strategy - large numbers of refugees were returning to countries laid waste by war. The fragility of the situations in Cambodia, Afghanistan, Angola, the Horn of Africa and South Africa demonstrated the precarious nature of voluntary return. Repatriation, therefore, called for a range of closely related responses to protect and assist returnees until they were reintegrated.

10. The complex nature of refugee situations required a concerted, multifaceted response from the international community. For that reason, the Office had been forging increasingly close operational partnerships with other agencies. In the Horn of Africa, it had sought to develop innovative inter-agency approaches to problems that went beyond the mandate of any one organization. The Cambodian operation demonstrated a successful system-wide framework for cooperation which ensured coherent political and humanitarian endeavours as well as reintegration programmes leading to longer-term rehabilitation.

11. UNHCR welcomed the establishment of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, and its collaboration with that Department was developing well. Coordination, however, could not replace the individual or collective capacity of the agencies and must be carefully focused to enhance the comparative advantages and expertise of individual agencies. In a world where persecution and strife were an everyday reality, protection through asylum was all the more important to humanitarian work. Never before had the unique mandate of the Office to provide protection to those fleeing persecution been so severely tested and never before had UNHCR so greatly needed the support of the international community.

12. Mr. ELIASSON (Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs), introducing the reports of the Secretary-General on assistance to refugees, returnees and displaced persons in Africa (A/47/529) and on humanitarian assistance to victims of natural disasters and similar emergency situations (A/47/540), said that the creation of a new Department of Humanitarian Affairs had been justified by the need for new instruments to deal with ever more numerous, complex and urgent humanitarian emergencies.

13. Demographic pressures interacting with poverty and environmental degradation, placing an intolerable strain on nations' already limited capacity to meet basic human needs, would make both internal and international migration increasingly common. In environmental crises, the difficulty of drawing a distinction between man-made and natural disasters called for consistent and comprehensive action vis-à-vis the entire affected population,

be they refugees, internally displaced people or victims of drought or conflicts. The problem of social and economic imbalances between people in camps, host communities and areas of origin should be addressed. Effective action called for an integrated approach.

14. While full use must be made of all available assets in the United Nations system to respond to emergencies, it must be recognized that the United Nations could not handle and solve all problems alone. There must be a pooling of resources and a division of labour among the United Nations, Governments, other international and regional organizations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the non-governmental community, failing which there was a risk of disappointment with the United Nations and ultimately its Member States. Coordination and cooperation, a question addressed by the Secretary-General in his report on humanitarian emergency assistance (A/47/595), should further strengthen the capacity of the international community to respond to humanitarian crises.

15. Document A/47/529, which focused on integrated relief, rehabilitation and development and on practical steps to address the root causes of displacement, prompted two comments. First, because of the generosity of African countries in receiving refugees despite their own difficulties, the international community, together with the countries concerned, must contemplate measures to assist local populations, in promoting integration or temporary self-reliance. Second, requirements for assistance to the displaced persons were often more acute and comprehensive after a civil war than during the conflict. Such was the case, for example, in Mozambique, where the expected movement of over 3 million people in the next year, at a time of unprecedented drought, required huge efforts by all parties concerned.

16. A recent escalation in the fighting in Liberia would exacerbate the situation of refugees, returnees and displaced persons. The United Nations country team in Monrovia had assessed emergency requirements, and Governments were urged to respond immediately to the Organization's urgent appeal.

17. The difficulties in the Horn of Africa, especially Eritrea, remained complex and daunting. Donors' pledges in response to the inter-agency appeal still fell short of total requirements by more than $60 million. The non-food sector was the most seriously underfunded. The gap between commitment and delivery of food aid had also created serious pipeline problems. The international community was urged to respond immediately to the appeal.

18. Three concrete issues raised in document A/47/540 deserved special mention. The first was the question of access to victims in acute crises. With the increasing role of humanitarian action, there had been growing acceptance of the principle of access in international and internal conflict situations, while taking into account the basic principles related to sovereignty and consent, as well as the impartiality and neutrality of United Nations relief operations. The second matter concerned relief corridors in

(Mr. Eliasson)

emergency zones. Recent developments had demonstrated the importance but also the complexity of establishing and using such corridors. On the basis of that experience, there was a need to consider more specific guidelines for effective access to people in need, as well as measures for improved protection of humanitarian relief workers in conflicts. Thirdly, the proposed compilation of an international list of persons and bodies with specific knowledge of emergency assistance might usefully be preceded by the establishment of an informal United Nations clearing-house mechanism for that purpose. A pragmatic approach was needed, and his Department, especially its Geneva branch, could be helpful in that regard, if given the task and the tools needed.

19. Many of the issues on the Committee's agenda could be discussed in greater depth within the context of its consideration of the question relating to a new international humanitarian order; such issues could include the evolution of international humanitarian law, particularly in regard to the security of relief workers or mass expulsions. The experience of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs could help the international community to strengthen the foundation on which to build assistance in emergencies in the years to come, in close cooperation with all partners in that humanitarian venture. In concluding, he thanked the Committee for its initiative in establishing a fund for United Nations relief efforts for Somalia.

The meeting rose at 11.10 a.m.